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RAND

The RAND I came to in the early summer of 1958 was preoccupied with one problem, all departments: fending off the danger of a Soviet surprise attack, Pearl Harbor-type, by discovering and remedying vulnerabilities in SAC retaliatory forces that the Soviets could exploit to disarm the United States and rule the world.

The previous fall—by coincidence, just a month after I had visited RAND in Santa Monica after a summer seminar on probability theory at Stanford [describe—earlier?—what brought me to visit RAND, why they were interested in me, and my experience of Santa Monica] —Sputnik had demonstrated to the world that the Soviets, with the capability to put a satellite in orbit, also had the rocket lift and precision to send an ICBM with a thermonuclear warhead to a target in the US.

[describe the US public and media reaction. The “science gap.” Funds for science and engineering. US unable to lift a satellite into orbit: the NASA rockets, non-military, were smaller than the Soviets were using (an ICBM booster) and unreliable. Humiliating failures. The second Soviet satellite, this one huge, with Laika aboard. Panic (though Ike said, “It’s not going to fall on their heads.” Not reassuring.)

Gaither Report (summarize): based on RAND R-290, AJW and Rowen. (note membership) Rockefeller Report, likewise. (When do I get my TS clearance, so I can read R-290 and R-266?)

The intelligence estimates were that the Soviets were well ahead of us in their ICBM program, and were probably (?) on a crash program, which would give them a significant capability against our 26 SAC bases in the ZI (Zone of the Interior: Continental US) perhaps by 1959, certainly by 1960, heading toward a huge force in the early Sixties, well ahead of the US.

AJW and his RAND colleagues had promoted an analysis of great vulnerability of SAC well before Sputnik, based on estimates of SU bomber capabilities, with only a minor role for ICBMs and sub-based missiles if any. So Albert insisted into the Sixties that his analysis of a “deterrence gap” had never rested fundamentally on predictions of a “missile gap.” But the addition of even twenty to forty Soviet ICBMs enhanced the possibilities of a disarming surprise attack ominously.

Back at the Society of Fellows at Harvard, I spent the fall of 1957 and spring of 1958 working on my ideas about “ambiguous” uncertainties that could not be expressed by numerical probabilities, the work that was eventually published as “Risk, Ambiguity and the Savage Axioms” in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in 1961 (?) and was elaborated in my Ph. D. thesis in 1962. But I kept in touch with these events, as who did not?

Eisenhower's reassurances and apparent calm about the challenge seemed to confirm the image of him as a retired grandfather, out of touch with reality, focused only on his golf game. That was the image shared by everyone I came to meet at RAND. It was paired with the notion that our sponsoring organization, the Air Force, which certainly didn't underrate the prospect of a vast Soviet superiority in ICBMs, didn't seem able bureaucratically to rise to that threat in an appropriate or effective way. That is, it was resisting or dragging its feet in adopting the recommendations that RAND had been making for several years at this point and which seemed all the more urgent after Sputnik.

Fixing the problem of SAC vulnerability was an obsession at RAND (not, it appeared perplexingly, in the Air Force), and the center of the obsessive ideation was the Economic Department, which I joined. In my first week, I was assigned to be the rapporteur of a discussion group (weekly? Or more often?) on responses to the strategic threat, including Albert Wohlstetter, Harry Rowen, Andy Marshall, and Fred Hoffman, the key strategic thinkers in the Department, and Herman Kahn of the Physics Department.

It was apparent from the beginning that this was as smart a bunch of men as I had ever encountered (and I had attended three meals a week for three years in the Society of Fellows, which had, in addition to the Junior and Senior Fellows, the brightest lights to visit Harvard as invited guests). And that first impression has never changed. But it was even better than that. In the middle of the first session, I ventured—though I was the youngest, assigned to be taking notes, and obviously a total novice on the issues—to express an opinion. Rather than showing irritation or ignoring my comment, Herman Kahn, brilliant and enormously fat, sitting directly across the table from me, looked at me soberly and said, *"You're absolutely wrong."*

I remember the exact feeling that evoked. A warm glow spread throughout my body. That was the way Harvard Crimson editors had routinely spoken to each other. I hadn't experienced anything like it for six years. At King's College, Cambridge, or at the Society of Fellows (arguments in the Marine Corps had not been intellectual), disagreements didn't remotely take this form, gloves off, take-no-prisoners. I remember feeling: I've found a home.

(The truth is: fifty years later, I still have dreams at night of being back at RAND.)

And the subject matter was of the highest imaginable urgency. We were in the most literal sense trying to save the world. A successful Soviet nuclear attack would be a catastrophe not only for America. It was taken for granted that in the Soviet Union some equivalent of RAND in the Soviet Ministry of Defense or Missile Forces was working just as urgently and obsessively to exploit their lead in offensive forces while they had it, if not by a Pearl Harbor attack then by compelling blackmail against the US and its NATO allies. We were saving the world not only from our Soviet counterparts but from the possibly fatal lethargy and bureaucratic inertia of the Eisenhower administration and our sponsors, the Air Force.